Where is New Zealand Literature Heading?

Witi Ihimaera

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A NEW ZEALAND BOOK COUNCIL LECTURE

NEW ZEALAND BOOK COUNCIL
Te Kaunihera Pukapuka o Aotearoa

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FOREWORD

Kia ora tātou

The New Zealand Book Council Lecture has become a prominent part of the literary landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand and provides an opportunity for one of our country's leading writers to discuss an aspect of literature close to their heart.

The 2015 lecture was significant for three reasons: firstly, it was a key part of the wonderful Dunedin Writers and Readers Festival – one of Australasia's stellar festival events. Secondly, the lecture took place at Dunedin's first literary festival as a UNESCO City of Literature, which is well-deserved recognition of the city's past and present as an extraordinary place of words and writers. Last – but certainly not least – we were privileged to have Witi Ihimaera deliver the lecture, one of Aotearoa New Zealand's most acclaimed writers.

Witi is a much-awarded writer of novels, short stories and poetry. An ex-diplomat, he is now a teacher, screenplay writer, playwright and essayist who has recently turned to memoir. For over four decades, Witi has touched our hearts and our lives as he helped us to discover ourselves and our country anew.

He continues to give us that gift in his memorable and provocative 2015 New Zealand Book Council Lecture.

Ngā mihi nui

Peter Biggs CNZM
Chair
New Zealand Book Council

INTRODUCTION

The address that follows was written for the New Zealand Book Council and presented as the opening session of the Dunedin Writers and Readers Festival.

It was a spoken text of 40-minutes' length followed by an interview with Peter Biggs, chair of the Book Council, and then a Q&A with the audience. Freewheeling and spiralling, the address was therefore shaped for a specific occasion, though I am happy to have it available to members of the Book Council.

The original transcript has been edited by Petra Westropp and conforms to what was given to the audience on that evening. Some of the subjects were later elaborated on in a lively Q&A, notably my remarks on writing schools and anarchic writing in New Zealand. Because the address was intended to propose questions about New Zealand literature within our evolving culture, I was glad to see further spirited conversation on the web.

I thank the Book Council and the Dunedin Writers and Readers Festival for the opportunity of presenting their second New Zealand Book Council Lecture.

Whāia e koe ki te iti kahurangi;
ki te tuohu koe, me maunga teitei

Witi Ihimaera

WHERE IS NEW ZEALAND LITERATURE HEADING?

Where is New Zealand literature – by New Zealand literature I'm referring mainly to New Zealand fiction and poetry – heading?

I've been going round and round in circles trying to answer this question and I realised that American columnist Ann Landers was right when she fabulously said, 'It is always darkest just before it becomes totally black.'

At least we know where our literature has come from, mainly out of a nationalistic imperative, from settlers who arrived in New Zealand primarily as assisted migrants. Most were of English heritage but some were from Wales, Ireland and, of course, Scotland. Indeed, it was Mark Twain on his visit to New Zealand who said of Dunedin: 'The people are Scotch. They stopped

here on their way from home to heaven – thinking they had arrived.'

Over time these settlers created a literature of New Zealand, not of the United Kingdom, just as other Commonwealth migrants were doing in Canada, India or Australia. In fact, New Zealand never existed until they – Curnow, Baxter and Fairburn in poetry, Sargeson, Shadbolt and Gee in fiction – wrote it into existence.

Our literature also came out of a second imperative that was not at all nationalistic. We could call this the individual artistic desire to write. It was demonstrated by writers like Mansfield or Mulgan or Hyde for whom writing was an art, and something that should be pursued at the highest levels of recognition.

In Mansfield's day, that recognition was conferred by the Bloomsbury Set, by Oxford and Cambridge and of course – as it still is for New Zealanders – London. Indeed, Mansfield was our first and best-known voluntary literary exile. Once she left New Zealand she never returned, and even when she wrote stories set here like 'Prelude' or 'The Garden Party', she didn't have nationalism in mind.

In 1915, she may have written: 'I want to write about my own country until I simply exhaust my store'. But

she followed it up with: 'not only because it is a "sacred debt" that I pay to my country because my brother and I were born there'. She then returned to her original sentiment: 'Oh, I want for one moment to make our undiscovered country leap into the eyes of the old world. It must be mysterious, as though floating – it must take the breath.'

There's a haunting ambivalence to this statement. Aspirations to write nation are balanced by the intention also to answer to the dictates of one's own artistic consciousness. So when Eleanor Catton said recently that our ownership of her success was strangely proprietorial – that success has to belong to everybody or the country really doesn't want to know about it – I caught an echo of Mansfield articulating the same dilemma in her time of how to preserve one's sense of individuality, while still wishing to do the best by her memory of that country of her childhood.

On this point, we have fine exemplars of literary excellence, among them Stead, Wedde, Manhire and Bornholdt in poetry; and Frame, Stead again, Knox and Perkins, and I'll include Mahy here, writers who are constructed as New Zealanders by us but who also are known as international writers by *The Observer* as well as *The New Yorker* and *The Times Literary Supplement*.

And as readers, I have to say that we are ambivalent too. We want our writers to remain New Zealanders. But we are also dazzled when divinity is conferred upon them from abroad. But what is the Man Booker Prize, anyway? Isn't it just a closed shop, a PR exercise shared by a limited number of UK literati glitterati who occasionally dispense their largesse to the colonies?

My point is that the two imperatives are still with us, so nothing much has really changed. Until the 1990s, however (I'm using the 150th anniversary of the Treaty of Waitangi as a marker), my opinion is that the main business of both imperatives was the production of a national literature about New Zealand and our identity as New Zealanders. We were inspired by such writers as RAK Mason who wrote:

> Such men as these not quarrel and divide,
> But, friend and foe, are friends in their hard sort …
> Here, in this far-pitched, perilous, hostile place,
> This solitary, hard-assaulted spot,
> Fixed at the friendless, utter verge of space?

Indeed, as a practitioner, I can vouch for the fact that the 1960s to the 1990s was an invigorating time, with women and Māori writers contributing to what

literary critic Patrick Evans considered the 'end of a literary monoculture and the beginnings of a time of abundance and multiplicity'. In poetry Hunt and Tuwhare, and in fiction Kidman, Grace, Temple, Wendt, Marshall and the brilliant Lloyd Jones spring to mind.

You in the audience, as readers, critics and fellow writers, also contributed to our success by buying our books or talking about them. How did you define what New Zealand literature was? Do you still hold to your definition today? What are New Zealand literature's main characteristics? What must it have to qualify? A New Zealand setting? A New Zealand character? A recognisable voice?

Let me put my cards on the table.

I am approaching the topic from a number of points of view. The first is as a Māori writer who has been working at the cliff face of cultural production to ensure equity between Māori and Pākehā, in literary terms. Telling the Māori Story rather than the Pākehā Story is my default position. In my case it's an attempt to create a New Zealand literature not based on the

Old World but Our World. The Māori 'sacred debt' is actually not to New Zealand – it is to Māori culture.

Thus if I had my way, I'd make New Zealand a literary republic privileging Māori or Māori–Pākehā bicultural imperatives over the traditional connection to the umbilical of empire. Instead of the traditional teaching of Shakespeare, Eliot and all those other Dead White Guys, I'd teach Māori mythology, art, history and culture. I'd think about increasing Māori content on New Zealand television with a Māori *Game of Thrones* and a contemporary saga based on Patricia Grace's recent fight to save her land from the Wellington motorway extension. I'd probably come down hard on all those nostalgia fests on Thursdays, Fridays and Sundays when people turn on their television sets to watch *Coronation Street*, *Downton Abbey* and *Antiques Roadshow* – you know who you are.

I believe that Māori are New Zealand's most identifiable nationalists. Indeed, many of you will recall that Sean Plunket on RadioLIVE called Catton 'an ungrateful hua'. Well, from the very beginning Māori writers have been the original ungrateful hua. Often, we have not been writing the same national story as Pākehā writers but, out of the implicit antagonism, together we are all crunching and creating a remarkable cultural space occupied by both of us.

Second, I am also approaching this question as, well, part of a particular age group – yours. Is there anybody in the audience under the age of thirty who isn't an usher and who paid for their own ticket?

In other words, I am of an older, better, generation that hasn't caught up. Although I do write almost solely on an iPad 2, I don't have an iPhone 6 or any of its cheaper Android equivalents, and I don't have an iPod either. I have absolutely no idea how to download so therefore still buy movies on DVD and Blu-ray. I don't have a Facebook page and I'm not interested in being a Friend, and I don't do Twitter.

Third – my friends don't call me Wicked Ihimaera for nothing – I also want to entertain. When a certain Māori singer was alive I had the pleasure of being mistaken for him. I was coming through customs after a trip overseas and the customs officer said to me, without looking at my passport, 'Welcome home, Sir Howard.'

I get this all the time. I was once leaving a theatre and a young girl ran up to me asking for my autograph because she loved my work, and she said *Once Were Warriors* was her favourite book. She was so insistent that I was Alan Duff that I signed his name. Somewhere in New Zealand there's a young woman who thinks she met him and has his signature to prove it.

This address, therefore, is from the outset fatally flawed by race, age, charm and humour, so I wouldn't trust it if I was you.

So with those three cautions, let me turn to where I think New Zealand literature has been wallowing in the past two or three decades since 1990, that convenient date of mine.

The nationalistic imperative has continued to give it (for want of a better word) its genetic ID, its bones, its sense of tradition, lineage and genealogy – of whakapapa. This imperative has been reinforced by our schools and universities, which teach the writers of the New Zealand canon, those writers who primarily address questions of our isolation from the rest of the world, engagement with the landscape and Māori, and our future. Like Denis Glover, who wrote:

> I do not dream of Sussex downs,
> or quaint old England's
> quaint old towns –
> I think of what may yet be seen,
> in Johnsonville or Geraldine.

Or Sam Hunt, who wrote about a small country town called Reporoa where:

everyone creating their own sort of light
throwing it out their kind of way …
I never felt less
like wearing dark glasses
than in Reporoa this morning.

They speak to our specific identity as Kiwis, that trope of identity supported by politics, culture, sport and, of course, the need to be different from Australia.

However, somewhere after 1990, that national imperative lost its mojo. Patrick Evans, the author of a perceptive book *The Long Forgetting* – an appropriate metaphor if there ever was one – identified the cause as an attitude that a new generation of New Zealand writers had taken to literature creation.

It was this – too much had been made of the tedious business of settlement, and it was time to recognise that the New Zealand writer could write whatever he or she wanted. Essentially, New Zealand literature was anything it liked to be and it was whatever a New Zealand writer wrote.

Do you agree? If a New Zealander writes it, does the work automatically become New Zealand literature? Does a book have to be set in New Zealand for it to be a New Zealand book? If you didn't know the author of

A Lion in the Meadow was one of New Zealand's most beloved children's writers, Margaret Mahy, would you have called it a New Zealand book? Shouldn't it be *A Lion in the Paddock*?

Popular New Zealand novelist Catherine Robertson took up the case for contemporary writers in a recent *New Zealand Listener* essay.

Catherine gives the surprising statistic that ninety-seven per cent of all New Zealanders' fiction buying is of writers from abroad. That's not a figure that will sustain a healthy local industry. Add to that, New Zealand Book Month has recently been canned, the New Zealand Book Awards postponed, and BNZ has ended its New Zealand short story sponsorship and, well, somebody needs to start a Support Kiwi Fiction campaign.

Therefore, Catherine considers, our book community needs to advocate, for commercial and not just cultural reasons, for New Zealand fiction in all its forms – not just the literature which has come from that nationalistic imperative I spoke of earlier. She mentions, in particular, the phenomenally successful New Zealander Nalini Singh whose paranormal novels jump straight onto *The New York Times* Best Seller List. Others might include newcomer Anna Smaill with her dystopian novel *The Chimes*, and chick-lit author and

friend Sarah-Kate Lynch. Kiwi-noir aficionados need look no further than Neil Cross, Liam McIlvanney, Paul Thomas, Paddy Richardson, Paul Cleave and Vanda Symon. Their sales make the usual 2,000 copies sold by New Zealand national literature specialists pale by comparison.

Is a paranormal novel New Zealand literature? How many Kiwis read Paul Cleave and consider him to be an author of New Zealand literature? And what about romance literature? It was interesting to hear Daphne de Jong, author of several romance novels, comment in her Janet Frame Memorial Lecture that what critics regard as thematic in New Zealand literature is defined as formulaic in hers. So here are more questions which might throw light on this matter.

Which three New Zealand writers' books should be in every New Zealand home? Which three New Zealand novels should be in every New Zealand home? Would anyone's lists include New Zealand commercial, romance, sci-fi, fantasy or other genre specialists? If not, what does that say of our willingness to widen our reading to New Zealand literature in, as Catherine mentions, all its forms and pride?

Here's the thing – there will always be an Elect. And sorry Catherine, that Elect will always be chosen by an older generation who don't like chick-lit, neo-noir,

fantasy and science fiction and, therefore, being old farts and geriatrics, have passed their use-by date.

However, ladies and gentlemen, time and tide are not on your side. You've already seen the signs.

The old verities that once defined New Zealand's writing industry have changed. The field is crowded by the young. They arrive almost instantaneously and fully formed onto the scene out of the many creative writing classes at universities, polytechnics and high schools. The most famous is the International Institute of Modern Letters, with its students supported in publication by Victoria University Press. They've sometimes been considered baby factories, assembly line, producing homogenised work that melts the writing into a literature which can be found almost anywhere and everywhere. While the 'tedious business of settlement' may not be their business, oh, sometimes you catch your breath at the occasional siren whakapapa sounding out of them.

Personally, I mourn that the homogeneity has led to a blunting of New Zealand's edge. I miss the sense of risk. Where are the anarchic novels, those books which change our world? While many books contain anarchic

and subversive ideas, in my opinion the last really subversive voice was Alan Duff and the last book to risk all was *Once Were Warriors*. Very few books have mainlined as *Warriors* did through New Zealand society.

What has happened to the great, dissident New Zealand voice?

Although we are, fortunately, not hostage to the problems that beset the wider world – migration, terrorism, religious conflicts, poverty – that of itself should not keep us from addressing chaos in our fiction. In the particular is the universal and surely there are ways of reflecting even, say, the fragmenting mayhem of the Middle East in stories centred on our military experiences in Iraq or as host to refugees. Or by way of stories about the impact of global deflation not only on international economic monetary policy but also on our own. Or through narratives of fearless young environmentalists protecting our biodiversity and saving the planet.

But as Colm Tóibín wrote in his review of *The Picador Book of Contemporary New Zealand Fiction*: 'Much of the writing is polite and orderly; writing is a way to ward off chaos and keep things as they were.'

Another sign of change is that the New Zealand publishing industry has fragmented and, at the same time, expanded. Once upon a time, there were a limited

number of highly respected editors and publishing houses who defined who and what was published. They had a list and if you couldn't get on it, you tried and tried again until you did.

The New Normal is that there actually may be more publishers than before, only it is not publishing as we used to know it.

While we have lost some major publishers we still have Penguin Random House, the four university presses, Potton and Burton Publishing, Bridget Williams Books and other local arms of overseas firms such as Allen & Unwin. Individuals from the collapse of Reed Publishing, for instance, have gone on to spearhead the rise of smaller publishing houses: David Ling, Oratia Media, Awa Press and Exisle have joined independents old and new like Halcyon Publishing, Rosa Mira Books, Steam Press, Paper Road Press, Mākaro Press and Upstart Press. The demise of Learning Media has led to an opportunity for Lift Education to fill the gap. Huia Publishers have benefitted from the new literacy and education market. And then there's Wendy Pye, a force of nature all her own.

A major change has been that the new generation of writers as well as older writers put out to pasture have turned to self-publishing – affirming, as Madonna

says, that it is indeed a material world. Actually, I like this evidence of the New Zealander's great ability with number eight wire, and applaud it. On my most recent trip to Unity Books in Wellington I was stunned by the number of self-published books on sale along with publisher-produced books. Most of them are what Catherine would classify as commercial literature, and New Zealand literature is being pushed onto the floor.

A book may not even be read as a hard copy any more. You can download it onto your Kindle. New Zealander Julie Thomas sold 40,000 copies of her first book, *The Keeper of Secrets*, as an ebook. Young Samoan author Lani Wendt is a bestselling children's fantasy writer with an astounding internet fan base.

We're also living in the Amazon marketplace and its priorities – and you know where New Zealand literature stands in the great Amazon Order of Things.

The final sign of change is that marketing basically equates with self-advertising. We are in the age of what I shall call the Global Popular. Self-advertising via blogs, YouTube, Facebook and other internet and digital platforms are what make (or break) writers' and books' reputations – and I simply refuse to do it. It's a medium for the young writer and, again, it's only a matter of time. Youth will always win over age, and

international consumption is always looking for the next rising star. It isn't looking for old bull whales like me, stranding myself because I don't want to play that game. The young writer is as much a media personality as the young television, music or cinema star.

I will now turn my thoughts from the past and the present to the future.

To reiterate: where is our literature heading? Why is it that there has been this 'long forgetting' and a turning away from the national imperative?

Anthony McCarten who won a Bafta for the adaptation of the movie *The Theory of Everything*, may have the answer. He says:

> I've set many of my works in New Zealand but it's not an obligation to me that I spend my whole life in the service of the grand New Zealand project, which is to define who we are. I think we've moved to a post-definition period, where we pretty much know who we are and can let our imagination take us where they will.

I can agree that we are in a post-definition period. And I think that the period of abundance and multiplicity that

Patrick Evans spoke of has been replaced by a different abundance and different multiplicity. I don't, however, like the idea of the imagination taking us where it will.

I prefer to think that stories can still be surprised out of our country. I believe that James K Baxter is still right when he saw us as:

> These unshaped islands,
> on the sawyer's bench,
> Wait[ing] for the chisel of the mind.

Bearing in mind the recent branding of New Zealand as Middle Earth, I support John Mulgan's view that: 'There is nothing soft about New Zealand, the country. It is very hard and sinewy, and will outlast many of those who try to alter it.'

While it's been great for New Zealand, it's time for Mr Tolkien and the tourist department to give us our country back.

In other words, call me an Old Essentialist, I can't and won't give up on that grand New Zealand project.

If I can bring a Māori image into play here, I don't like the idea of New Zealand literature existing without a pou tokomanawa, a central post.

If we let the imagination take us where it will, most often it will find its stories not in New Zealand but in

the great Out There, and while world literature might be the better for it, we won't. Anyway, writing out of the imagination is too easy, it lacks rigour and it lends itself to the generic – to a literature that could be anywhere and everywhere.

I acknowledge the perfectly understandable and strong narrative which ties us to Europe, but one need only look at our current trading partners to realise other important relationships have developed. My question is, if we are to have a different abundance and multiplicity, can we disconnect it from the same umbilical that we've always had to the Northern Hemisphere and reconnect it to the Pacific and Pacific Rim instead? Can we begin to consider writing a different narrative, based on our region's history and for our region's people? Why are we still entranced with a world on the other side of the globe which is asleep while we are awake? Isn't it time to start thinking of making our country leap not into the eyes of the Old World, but Our World?

And it is so easy to lose touch with the writers of today. For instance, a list of over 130 artists was recently published supporting Catton's right to speak her mind. I found it personally embarrassing – I only recognised around twenty names on the list. The others clearly

occupy a different writing environment, a culture all of its own. It's kind of like Bluff oysters. Once upon a time they were really large – can you remember? – and fewer. Now they are all industrially farmed and smaller, and someone is even suggesting growing them in Otago Harbour.

That different writing environment and culture, you know – the individual is the story. Well, it's nobody's fault but ours if today's writers don't have our kaupapa, our purpose – if they prefer, or choose, not to write local or glocal – and instead write about themselves within the various electronic platforms that constitute their synthesised world.

Actually, 'ours' is the wrong word. Quite frankly, your writers are your problem and if you haven't nurtured them, mentored them, recognised them, you have only yourselves to blame, after all you are their kuia and kaumātua.

I have my own writers to think about and they exhibit similar symptoms. Some of the people who read them assume that if a Māori writes it, that automatically qualifies the work as an example of Māori literature.

Well, no. To take a simple example from the movies, Lee Tamahori made a James Bond film called *Tomorrow Never Dies*. Is it a Māori film because Lee made it?

I have to say that some of my work qualifies as Māori but some doesn't. For instance, *Nights in the Gardens of Spain* has a Pākehā protagonist and it isn't a Māori novel. Actually, I don't know what kind of novel it is. A friend found it in the gardening section of the library and pointed out this error. The next time he visited the library, he found the librarian had moved it to the world travel section under 'Spain'.

Indeed, what is a Māori work and what isn't can sometimes be a vexed question. It may interest you to know that some Māori don't consider *Whale Rider* a Māori film, because although I wrote it, Pākehā Niki Caro directed it. On the other hand, they think that the Māori *Merchant of Venice* is a Māori film because it was directed by a Māori and is in the reo, even though its originating writer is Shakespeare.

I'm veering from the topic.

Young Māori writers don't want to write about the marae, and why should they? After all, Patricia Grace, Keri Hulme, Tina Makereti, Whiti Hereaka and Briar Grace-Smith are there to write the Māori Sublime, so they don't need to. And they have me, Alan Duff and Robert Sullivan writing the Māori Political, scraping the brains out of our skulls, so they don't have to do that either. If they therefore prefer to find their stories

in their personal lives, or if their Māori reality is that their lives lack Māori inflection, is that their fault?

In what seems to be an inevitable development, contemporary Māori writers, like their Pākehā counterparts, appear not to consider that Māoriness needs to be constructed. Their stories are mostly about who they are rather than what they are, and I can suck on that.

My friend and cousin Iritana Tāwhiwhirangi, founder of the Kohanga Reo movement, has recently said she has never known any time in our Māori history when Māori have been so disparate.

Can Māori afford to burn the Māori nationalistic bridges? That idea of 'sacred debt'?

In my opinion, that option isn't possible. We can't be like Cortez, who burnt his ships on arrival in America to prevent his men returning home to Spain. For Māori, this is where our home is. This is our England. This is our Spain.

For us, kapa haka, in our own language, may be a lifeboat.

I've been going round and round in circles, and I hope I haven't made you too giddy, but let me try to land on

a square. In an earlier draft of this address, the square was one I didn't like.

It was this, I was telling my son-in-law Steve what the subject was, and he asked me: 'So is there such a thing as New Zealand literature?'

He surprised an answer out of me. I said, 'No, there isn't.' As one of the new generation, he agreed.

However, that's not an answer that you, attending this session of the Dunedin Writers and Readers Festival, will find helpful, being believers and advocates of New Zealand literature.

So I've gone around in circles again and landed on another square, which is that New Zealand literature still exists – but, as I have tried to convey, it is not New Zealand literature as you and I know it.

What of the future?

I will agree with Catherine Robertson that the definition must be widened and that for economic reasons, as well as for the survival of New Zealand literature as a species within a world environment, it is better to be inclusive of all rather than exclusive to some.

I would love to see our literature find a different home in the world, not the Old World, but Our World.

As for the pou tokomanawa of it, the central post, that must continue, for there are many stories that can still be written out of the continuing whakapapa of all our lives.

For instance, it seems to me that over the past three decades New Zealand has embarked upon, albeit unconsciously, the grand joining of bloodlines, genealogies and histories. How fantastic that has been. There was a time when I was a young man when both Jane's and my parents were against our marrying. One of those who welcomed it with a certain amount of glee was Jane's grandmother, who recalled that her ancestor Cyprian Bridge had fought against Māori during the Land Wars. Now look at us, look at you. Look at them, the mokopuna.

Out of that grand joining, what other stories may come?

I think the attitude of Boy, in Taika Waititi's terrific film, needs to be acknowledged. The first shot of the film shows his smiling face as he says, 'Kia ora, my name is Boy. Welcome to my interesting world.' His poupou, or the central post of his life, is Michael Jackson. Boy, or Girl, live in a fantastic, universalised world now. Their cultural histories are hybridised, hyphenated and intoxicatingly mixed up. They are no longer exclusively one thing or another. Their world is, indeed, interesting.

I might leave the last word to a First Nations author and friend of mine, Richard Wagamese. We were talking on this topic and he said, 'You know Witi, it's all a question of balance.' I realised that of course he was right. And then Richard said, 'Gravity keeps us anchored to the ground. It also allows birds to fly.'

I think Richard was implying that all literatures are in a state of constant flux. Let's hope, in our case, that the balance will from time to time default to nation.

No, I will leave the last word to poet, filmmaker, biographer and curator, Roger Horrocks. He may point the way to considering the topic.

It lies in the notion of reinvention.

Roger thinks that, during our lifetimes, we have seen New Zealand pass through an extraordinary series of changes and reinventions. When he was growing up in the 1950s, the country still felt like a British colony. It was then transformed by many influences such as American culture, corporate capitalism, the Māori renaissance, the women's movement, gay rights, Pacific Island cultures, links with Australia, links with Asia. And now we are being reinvented once again by the digital revolution.

Perhaps that is what is happening. But note Roger's last comment. He considers that we are being reinvented *by* the digital revolution. That's the danger. Given the accelerating rate of digital media alternatives – and that reading is becoming screen-based, not book-based – the re-invention is not coming from inside, it's coming from outside.

The world is us now. We are the world.

We must find an exponential solution.

What New Zealand do we see? What New Zealand do the mokopuna see? Is it the same New Zealand? What new New Zealand will they write into existence? I'm hoping it won't be too homogenised and that, like in the old days, when you got milk in bottles, the cream will rise to the top.

If not, ah well, it's been great being Middle Earth. I wonder who we will be next?

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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BIOGRAPHY

Witi Ihimaera is a novelist, short story writer, anthologist and librettist. He has the distinction of being the first Māori writer to publish both a book of short stories and a novel.

He is of Te Whānau-a-Kai descent, with close affiliations to Te Aitanga-a-Māhaki, Tūhoe, Te Whānau-ā-Apanui, Ngāti Kahungunu and Ngāi Tāmanuhiri, and links to Rongowhakaata, Te Whakatōhea and Ngāti Porou.

He sees himself as a Māori in the world, and thinks of 'the world I'm in as being Māori, not European'. A central theme in his fiction is interpretation and reinterpretation of the concerns of iwi in the past.

His novel *The Whale Rider* has been made into an internationally successful feature film.